

Chairman McNamara, members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

5165

My name is Kerry Carlson, I am a resident of Cumberland. I have also been a Cumberland educator for 29 years, I am currently a school counselor at Joseph L. McCourt Middle School and I serve as President of the Cumberland Teachers' Association, representing over 440 members.

I am here to advocate for House Bill 5165 that addresses the critical mental health and emotional well-being of our children and adolescents.

The statistics are alarming. Between 2007 and 2018, youth suicide rates increased by 57%. This surge reflects a broader crisis, with rising levels of anxiety, depression, behavioral disorders, and suicidal ideation among young people. Dr. Vivek H. Murthy, the U.S. Attorney General, has highlighted these concerning trends.

While various factors contribute to this crisis, the reality is clear: our children need support, and schools are pivotal in providing it. As educators, we look to you to assist us in enhancing students' emotional well-being, behavior, and academic success.

From my experience, disruptive behaviors and classroom interruptions have escalated significantly over the past decade. Yet, we lack the staffing and resources to properly address these challenges. We urgently need more social workers, school psychologists, counselors, and paraprofessionals to help students de-escalate when needed and to offer individualized support. We also need policies that prioritize student well-being and provide clear guidance for educators. As those on the front lines, we need a seat at the table when these policies are developed and implemented. Additionally, we must address the growing negative impacts of technology and social media on our students during the school day.

Opportunities for educators and administrators to collaborate on mental and behavioral supports are critical to developing comprehensive and consistent policies - this bill does that.

In closing, I understand you face many competing priorities, and your jobs are incredibly demanding. However, I strongly urge you to consider Bill H5165. The mental health and academic success of our students depend on it.

Thank you for your time and consideration.